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ABSTRACT

Social support systems often relate to a person's ability to cope with stressful events. When the stressful event involves relocation, however, the benefits of social support may not extend beyond the relocation. A study was conducted to examine how a move to college affects social support and homesickness. College freshmen (N=70) who were from out of state, lived on campus, and had few friends or relatives living near their college completed social support and homesickness questionnaires at four times: (1) in summer prior to leaving home for college; (2) in September of their freshman year; (3) in November of their freshman year; and (4) in March of their freshman year. Categories of social support examined were general socializing, direct aid, general advice, pleasant intimate interaction, and troubling intimate interaction. The results revealed that students with high summer support satisfaction maintained higher support satisfaction at college, but experienced no greater homesickness than did students with low summer support satisfaction. Regardless of level of summer support satisfaction, homesickness increased then decreased. Males and females reported different levels of support satisfaction and different patterns of change across time. Females tended to report greater support satisfaction across all categories of support than did males. (NB)

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Social Support During A Transition: Longitudinal Analysis of Gender Differences

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Running head: SOCIAL SUPPORT DURING A TRANSITION

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Abstract

Social support changes upon relocating to college and the development of five support categories across the academic year were examined. Students with high Summer support satisfaction maintained higher support satisfaction at college, but experienced no greater homesickness than students with low Summer support satisfaction. Males and females reported different levels of support satisfaction and different patterns of change across time.

Social Support During A Transition: Longitudinal Analysis of Gender Differences

Although social support systems often relate to psychological adjustment, physical health, and the ability to withstand stressful events (Andrews, Tennson, Hewson & Valiant, 1978; Heller & Swindler, 1983; Leavy, 1983; Sytouch & D'arcy, 1984; Wilcox, 19881) such benefits often come from stable social support systems. In contrast, when the stressful event involves relocation (Ammons, Nelson & Wodarski, 1982; Brett, 1980; Shumaker & Stokols, 1982; Stokols & Shumaker, 1982), the benefits of social support may not extend beyond the relocation itself. The present study examined how a move to college affects social support and homesickness.

Two theoretically plausible, but somewhat contradictory hypotheses can describe the effects of moving away from a social support system. On the one hand, individuals with more satisfactory supports may be accustomed to relying on their support systems when dealing with life and solving problems. Consequently, individuals who had always depended on their social supports may find their usual coping mechanisms less available when they move away from their support

systems. In contrast, individuals with less satisfactory support systems may be more accustomed to facing stressful events alone. On the other hand, research suggests that individuals who have high quality social supports have other personal resources such as social skills or self-reliant and caring attitudes that would allow them to develop more satisfactory supports after a transition than individuals with a history of poor quality social supports (Bowlby, 1969; Felner, Farber & Primavera, 1983; Hansson, Jones & Carpenter, 1984; Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983).

In order to resolve the contradictions that well-supported students have the most to lose but also have the skills to replace their losses, it is predicted that relocation will have different consequences for feelings of loss and feelings of support satisfaction. Students with high levels of Summer support are hypothesized to report high levels of post-relocation support than students with low levels of Summer support. Yet, because the students with high levels of Summer support had to leave a high quality support system they are hypothesized to report greater homesickness than students with low Summer support.

These two hypotheses were tested on 70 middle-class, Caucasian, incoming Freshmen, 30 males and 40 females, who lived in the University of Utah residence halls. Subjects were all from out-of-state, with few friends or relatives living close to college. The subjects completed questionnaires at four different times: In Summer prior to leaving home to attend the University; in September early in the Autumn quarter; in November prior to the Thanksgiving holiday; and in March during the Spring quarter.

The primary instrument used was a social support questionnaire adapted to meet the special needs of this study from the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (Barrera, Sandler & Ramsay, 1981). Five categories of Social Support were examined: General socializing, direct aid, general advice, pleasant and troubling intimate interaction. On a seven-point bipolar scale subjects responded to the question of how satisfied they were with the quality of the support they received during the week.

The other instrument was a seven-item homesickness scale selected from a longer questionnaire to measure a general sense of loss (Montemayer, Brown & Clayton; 1981). On the seven-point bipolar scale students

agreed or disagreed with statements concerning feelings about missing home, family and friends.

A median split of the average across the five categories of Summer support satisfaction (M = 5.03, SD = .932, median = 5.00) grouped students into "low" and "high" levels of Summer Support (resulting groups report Summer support means of 4.20 and 5.68). Gender and Summer social support satisfaction (Sumsat) were between subject factors and time the within subject factor in subsequent repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA). As predicted a significant sumsat main effect ($F(1,66) = 7.63$, $p < .007$) revealed that students who were accustomed to high levels of support satisfaction during the Summer reported higher support satisfaction at college than did students who had reported lower support satisfaction during the Summer.

A gender main effect approached significance ($F(1,66) = 3.69$, $p = .059$) with females tending to report greater support satisfaction across all categories of support than did the males (means = 5.25 vs. 5.21). This finding might indicate that females have better skills to develop new social supports. Figure 1 illustrates both the significant Summer satisfaction main effect and triple interaction (sumsat by gender by quadratic) ($F(1,66) = 4.03$, $p < .05$). The

interaction is accounted for by the contrast of males low in Summer support reporting an initial increase then a decrease (Ms = 4.96, 5.21, 4.86) in support, while all other groups reported an initial decrease then increase in support satisfaction (males, high sumsat Ms = 5.55, 5.35, 5.52; females, low sumsat Ms = 5.28, 5.10, 5.62; and females, high sumsat Ms = 5.90, 5.70, 5.71). There were no other significant interactions.

The benefits of having had good former support satisfaction appears to transfer to the new environment. Such students may have acquired the necessary skills to develop new satisfactory networks. However, another important implication of these results is the finding that those who experienced low support satisfaction in the Summer also reported a higher support satisfaction during the college year. They appear to have benefited from the relocation.

A 2 X 2 X 3 (Summer support by gender by time) repeated measures ANOVA on general homesickness was examined. It revealed that students with high and low levels of Summer support satisfaction did not differ in levels of general homesickness (M = 3.78 vs. 3.80). Thus the loss of especially good Summer supports does not lead to greater homesickness, suggesting a picture

of independence rather than dependence for students who have prior history of satisfactory support.

The homesickness analysis also revealed an unexpected, but significant main effect for time ($F(2,62) = 10.06$, $p < .001$). Both the linear ($F(1,62) = 6.25$, $p < .015$) and quadratic ($F(1,62) = 15.60$, $p < .001$) trends also emerged as significant. In addition the linear by gender interaction ($F(1,63) = 4.10$, $p < .05$) was significant. An examination of the means suggest that the linear trend is more characteristic of the male's scores (Ms = 3.53, 4.12, 4.04) and the quadratic trend more characteristic of the female's homesickness scores (Ms =3.59, 3.94, 3.64). A decrease in homesickness is more noticeable for the females.

As illustrated in figure 2, the most significant changes over time appear to involve an increase in homesickness from Fall 1 to Fall 2. Therefore, the greatest amount of homesickness is not reported early in the Fall as might be expected, but occurs later in the Fall quarter. Initially the students may be distracted or overwhelmed by the newness of the transition itself to feel the full impact of missing their family and friends.

It is interesting that by the end of the academic year when one would have expected students to have

developed new supportive social networks, that they report only a moderate reduction in homesickness. Thus enjoying close and frequent contact with college friends did not diminish the closeness to or longing for old friends and family.

In summary, Summer support satisfaction does predict college support satisfaction but it does not predict homesickness. Regardless of levels of Summer support satisfaction homesickness increases then decreases. Students who left high quality hometown social supports suffered no clear ill effects. This may stem from the particular type of loss involved in a home to college move and may not generalize to other types of relocation. This may also be due to the fact that the present study examined limited aspects of the relocation on social support and homesickness. It is possible that other aspects of adjusting to relocation such as physical health or academic well-being, might reveal the stresses of relocation over time.

Finally, two lines of research are suggested by these results. First, because of the stability in social support exhibited by the students in the present study, it is appropriate to investigate the contribution of stable individual difference factors such as coping and communication skills on the

ability to handle transitions. Similarly, the student's psychological preparations in advance of the relocation might explain the relatively easy transitions these students achieved.

A second line of research is prompted by findings that homesickness was not a function of Summer support and that it did not diminish across the year. Researchers are encouraged to investigate whether homesickness is related to problems of adjustment, and what factors encourage or alleviate it.

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SOCIAL SUPPORT CATEGORIES

GENERAL SOCIALIZING
Engaged in a social interaction with someone (e.g., visiting, talking, going to movies, games, or other social events).

DIRECT AID
Received favors from someone or help on a task (e.g., someone helped you do your typing, shopping, loaned you money, gave you a ride).

ADVICE AND INFORMATION
Talked with someone about places to go, things to do, ways to do things (e.g., got directions to a place, advice about school work or other types of work).

INTIMATE INTERACTION, PLEASANT TOPICS
Intimate interaction where you revealed positive emotions or talked about very pleasant matters (e.g., talked about your hopes and achievements, nurtured an intimate relationship, revealed your unhappiness).

INTIMATE INTERACTION--TROUBLING TOPICS
Intimate interaction where you revealed personal problems or brought up troubling matters (e.g., talked about your fears or failures, had an intimate argument, revealed your unhappiness, brought up interpersonal problems).

Table 1

Support Satisfaction during Academic Year:

Summer Support X Gender X Time ANOVA

Main Effects	d.f.	F	p <
Summer Support	(1, 66)	7.63	.01
Gender	(1, 66)	3.69	.06
Time	(2, 65)	.42	ns
Linear	(1, 66)	.01	ns
Quadratic	(1, 66)	.84	ns
Significant Interactions			
Summer Support X Gender X Time	(2, 65)	2.62	.08
Linear SS X G X T	(1, 66)	1.95	ns
Quadratic SS X G X T	(1, 66)	4.03	.05

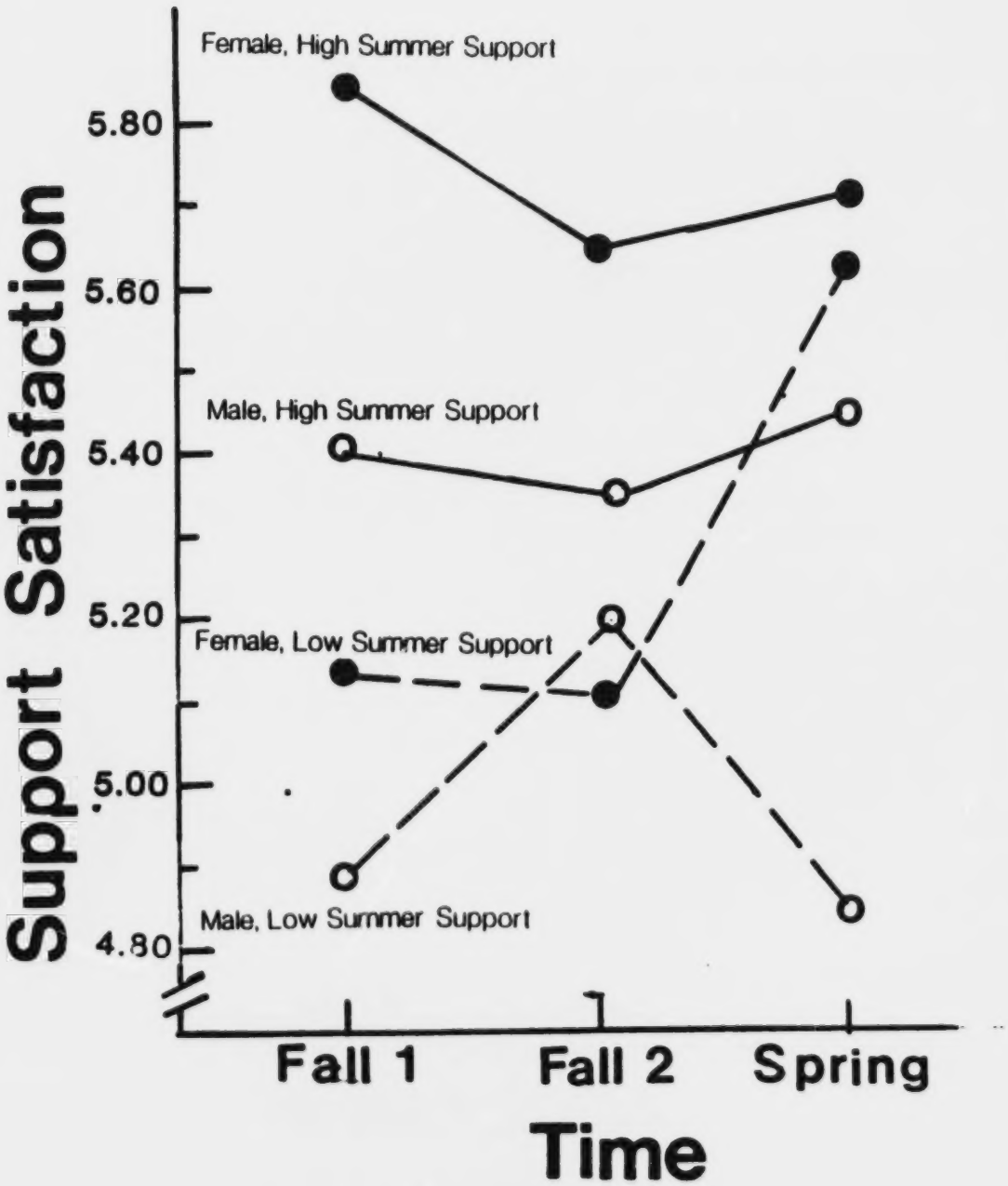

Figure 1

Support Satisfaction during Academic Year:

Summer Support X Gender X Time ANOVA

Table 2

Homesickness during Academic Year:

Summer Support X Gender X Time ANOVA

Main Effects	d.f.	F	p <
Summer Support	(1, 63)	.00	ns
Gender	(1, 63)	.51	ns
Time	(2, 62)	10.06	.001
Linear	(1, 62)	6.25	.05
Quadratic	(1, 62)	15.60	.001
Significant Interactions			
Summer Support X Gender X Time	(2, 62)	2.03	.14
Linear SS X G X T	(1, 63)	4.10	.05
Quadratic SS X G X T	(1, 63)	.00	ns

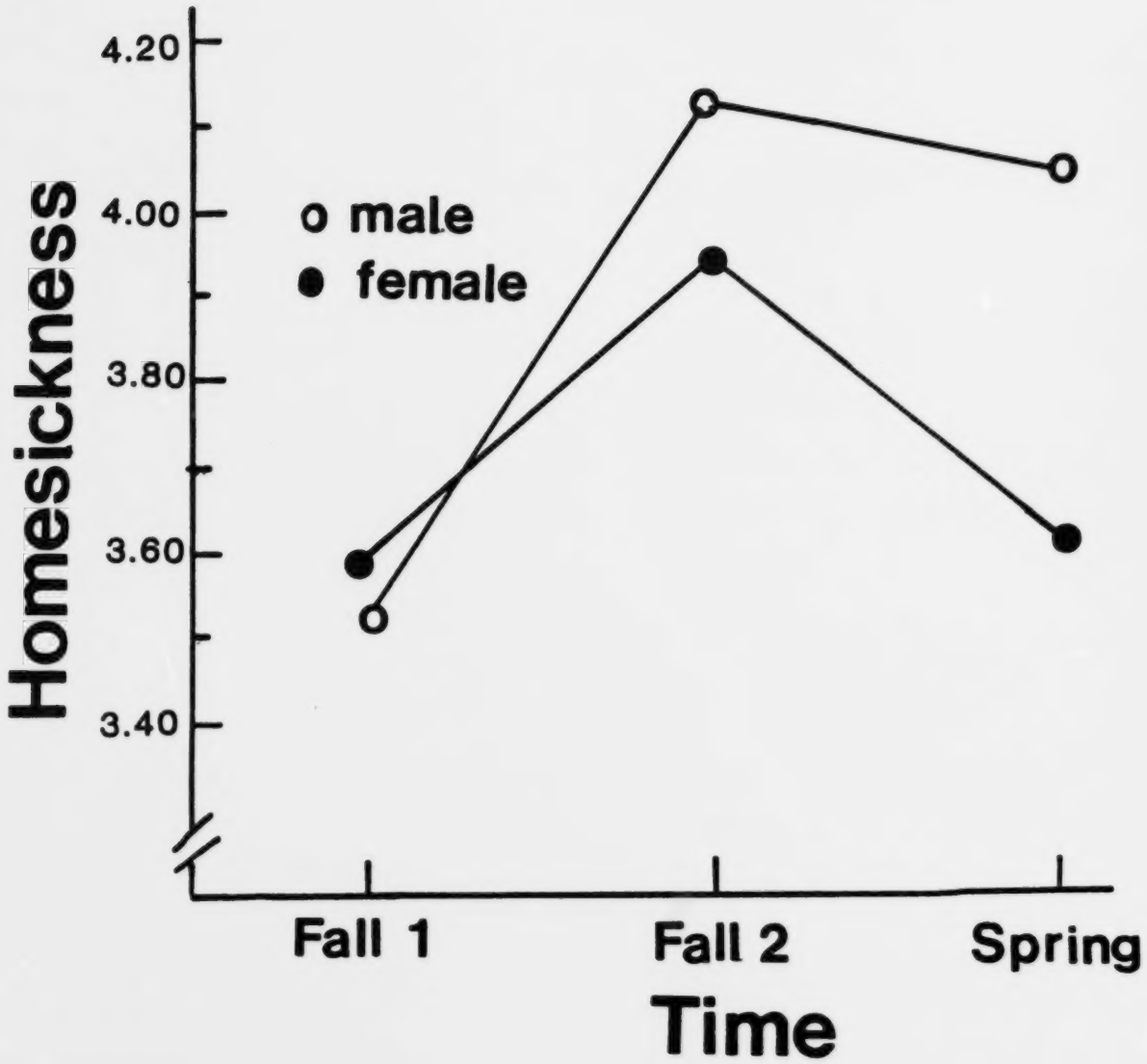

Figure 2

Homesickness during Academic Year

Summer Support X Gender X Time ANOVA